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Lashes to Ashes, Exploring the Hidden Dimensions of Human Hair

Rania Chamsine

Virginia Commonwealth University

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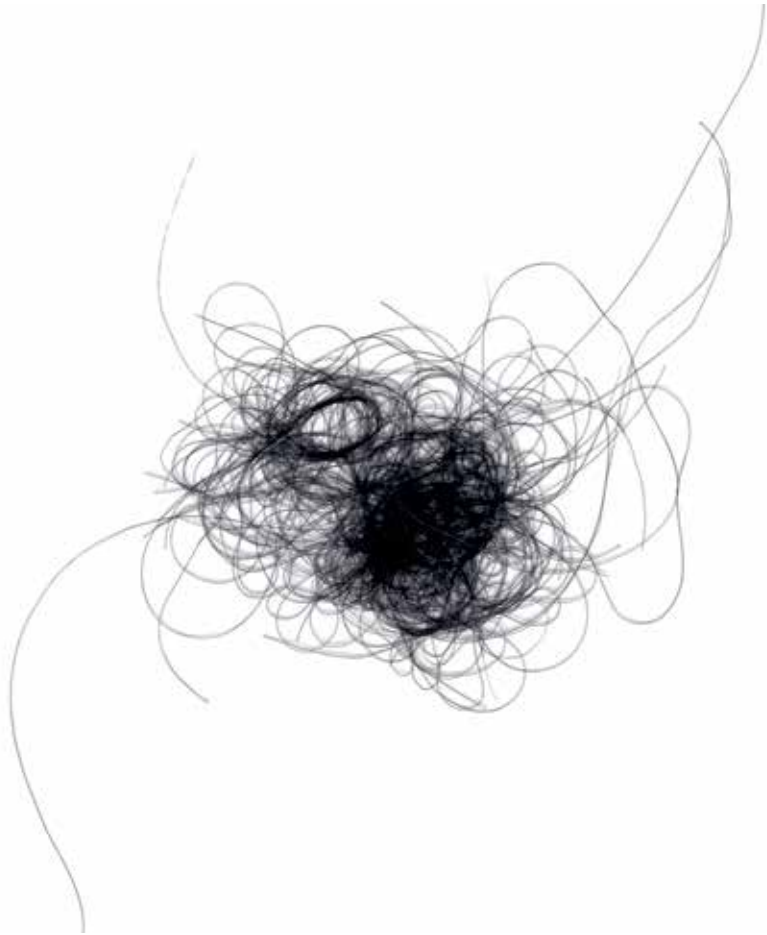
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Lashes to Ashes

*Exploring the Hidden Dimensions of
Human Hair*

Rania Chamsine

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Master of Fine Arts in Design
Studies of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, in partial
fulfilment for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design Studies.

Doha, Qatar
May 2013

Signatures Page

Approval certificate for Rania Chamsine for the thesis project entitled Lashes to Ashes, Exploring the Hidden Dimensions of Human Hair. Submitted to the faculty of the Master of Fine Arts in Design Studies of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design Studies.

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Abstract

Hair is power, beauty and seduction: a reflection of ethnicity and religion, and even a canvas for self-expression. A key feature in defining identity and social status, it holds the essence of our individuality. However, once removed from its original and natural setting—the epidermis—hair is seen as waste, and often evokes disgust.

The objective of this thesis is to explore human hair, which particularly in the Arabic-Islamic region, carries great significance and raises many religious, cultural, and gender issues. Through design, and informed by critical design theory, I explore how this corporeal material can be reused and re-presented as a means of interrogating the references, symbolism, and connotations of hair

Significance





Personal

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

My feminine name and my girlish swimsuit weren't enough for the six-year-old children to identify my gender. It was my hair, and my hair alone, that determined my femininity. Why wouldn't it? Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Pocahontas all had beautiful, long, luscious hair. Rapunzel would never have lived happily ever after with her prince had it not been for her tresses, and once Delilah cut his hair Samson's virility, masculinity, and bravery were lost.

My mom was among those who falsely believed that cutting my hair very short would cause it to grow in thicker. Little did she know that, twenty-seven years later, our trip to the barber would inspire my thesis topic.

When I first decided to research hair, I found it difficult to identify what motivated me to delve into this topic. However, the more I researched, the more I discovered the significance of hair in my personal narrative. The thirty-two-year-old me wanted to answer the question that my six-year-old self was too hurt to ask: What is it about hair that defines who we are? And why does this symbol of beauty, femininity, sexuality, self-expression, virility, and seduction, once removed from the body, evoke feelings of disgust and revulsion?



Cultural Value

Throughout history, hair has been given great symbolic significance by societies, from the caveman who is portrayed dragging his woman by her hair, to magicians who use a tuft of someone's hair to cast a spell against them.¹ Hatshepsut, the Pharaoh ruler of Egypt, was always illustrated with her long, false, gold beard that, at the time, was a symbol of royalty and power.² And since her betrothal to Albert, Queen Victoria always wore jewellery containing his hair. During the Victorian age, wearing sentimental jewellery that contained someone's hair was extremely popular and symbolized love and respect.³ African slaves used their hair as a form of expression; cutting, shaving, wrapping or braiding it into various designs through which their cultural traditions were conveyed to the world.⁴

Hair became a substantial religious symbol because of the layered meanings linked to hair: from beauty, seduction and fertility, to creativity, spiritedness and grace. Accordingly, hair plays a vital role in reflecting one's moral values. Christian and Islamic religious figures grow beards; Buddhist monks and Hajj pilgrims shave their heads; Rastafarians and Indian Sikhs do not cut their hair; and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women cover their hair as instructed in the Quran, the Bible, and the Torah, respectively.

In the GCC in particular, hair covering is not just a religious obligation, but also a social one. Islam requires full coverage of hair, while in Qatar, for example, women are expected to wear a headscarf, or *sheila*, over their heads, even if they do not cover religiously. Although it is transparent and may not conceal the hair entirely, this *sheila* should nevertheless remain on the head at all times. The arrangement of the *sheila* in itself is an admired practice; women adjust their headscarves without totally removing them from their heads, so a part of the hair remains covered all the time. All this is a social obligation mostly discarded when travelling, during which the *sheila* is either replaced by a regular headscarf tied back, or the whole covering is dismissed entirely. Outside of Qatar, it may be socially accepted for Qatari women to go out in public without concealing their hair, but in Qatar, society and tradition play vital roles in women's image.

Whether religious, magical or personal, hair is saturated with cultural references that lend it more importance than its corporeal material.

1 Diane Ackerman. *Natural History of the Senses*. London: Orion Books Ltd, 1996

2 Victoria Sherrow. *Encyclopedia of Hair: A cultural History*. Westport: Greenwood, 2006.

3 Ginny Redington Dawes, and Corinne Davidov. *Victorian Jewelry: Unexplored Treasures*. New York: Abbeville, 1991.

4 Donald Kalsched. *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit*. London and New York, 1996.



"Mies Chair", Archizoom



"Body Modification for Love", Michiko Nitta
The designer proposes a technique for genetically growing selected parts of a beloved person on one's skin. In this picture a patch of living hair is grown on the arm as a reminder of one's mom.

"Figuration and the Body", Hayv Kahraman
Anthropometric Side View, 2011, ink on paper mounted on wood, human hair and map pins, 101.5 x 101.5 cm



Significance to the Field

Last spring, I was fortunate to work with Fiona Raby, one of the originators of experimental and critical design. As I studied Raby and her students' work, I was struck by her approach that seemed to straddle the intersection between fine art and design. According to the formalizers of critical design, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Critical Design uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions and givens. It is more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a method.*¹

The term *Critical Design* was first used by Anthony Dunne in 1999, in his book *Hertzian Tales*. When asked about the definition of Critical design in an interview during "Designing Critical Design" exhibition, Anthony Dunne answered that *it is a way of using design to not solve problems but to raise issues and ask questions and to challenge assumptions.*² This thesis similarly tries to challenge the importance people ascribe to human hair, by placing hair in an unconventional venue that causes viewers to ponder and question their preconceptions related to hair and its affiliated practices and rituals.

Although Dunne named it *Critical Design*, critique in design existed long before that. The Italian Radical movement emerged in the sixties, and was highly critical of social values and design ideologies.³ Ettore Sottsass, founder of Memphis, one of the Avant Garde Radical groups, defined design as *a way of discussing society, politics, eroticism, food and even design.*⁴ The Radical movement sought out alternative lifestyles that didn't necessarily follow function. For example, the famous *Mies Chair* designed by Archizoom, an architectural studio founded in 1966, was an ironic take on modern furniture and questioned the aesthetics of modernism and its approach of form-follows-function.⁵

In short, Critical Design challenges preconceptions and tries to inspire a change in perception and thought through design. This thesis adapts Critical Design theory by reflecting on the symbolism and the social and cultural values that are linked to

¹ "Critical Design FAQ." *Dunne & Raby*. <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0> (Oct 15, 2011).

² "Dunne & Raby deel 1." *Youtube*. September 29, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sX3plolTpts> (Accessed Feb 5, 2011).

³ Claudia Neumann. "Radical Design." *Springer Reference*. <http://www.springerreference.com/docs/html/chapterdbid/168693.html> (Accessed Feb 5, 2013).

⁴ William Myers. *Bio Design: Nature • Science • Creativity*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012.

⁵ "Mies Archizoom Associati." *Vitra Design Museum*. <http://www.design-museum.de/en/collection/100-masterpieces/detailseiten/mies-archizoom-associati.html> (Accessed Feb 5, 2013).

human hair, and also by questioning the importance given to not only hair itself, but also to the location of the hair: on the body, off the body, on the head, chin, or chest. The designed objects are not necessarily commercial, or solutions to problem, but rather the intent is to inspire reflection on one's own perception of hair, and on practices and rituals related to it, as dictated by religions and societies.

This thesis aims to conceptually explore various facets linked to this particular human-derived substance. It is an approach saturated and defined by the social norms of the culture which conceived them, and in the context of the GCC region, this approach is especially rich and multi-dimensional.

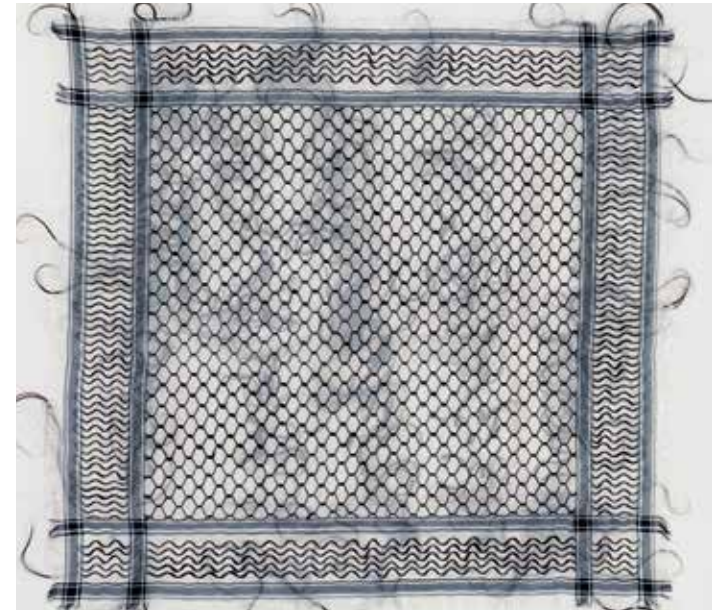
Covering hair is so important in this region that in Kuwait, for example, when four women finally made it into Parliament, all problems in the country and the region were put aside in favour of discussing a law for *decent attire* as a reaction against the two uncovered female Parliament members.⁶

Although this topic has been addressed before by fine artists in this region, such as Mona Hatoum and Havy Kahramian, who both worked with hair as a medium, it would be of value to introduce these provocative topics into a local context, through design. By bringing hair again to the body, wrapped on the head or covering the face, this thesis attempts to open up discussion: to see how people with various social restrictions would react, and with how much open mindedness, to using a corporeal material of great religious and cultural significance in a new avenue.

⁶ "Kuwait MPs in walkout over cabinet." *Aljazeera*. 01 June 2009. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/05/200953114825878337.html> (accessed Jan. 30, 2013).

State of the Design

Hair has always been acknowledged as a fundamental element in art and design.





Hair Jewellery

Victorian Jewellery

In the late 18th century and throughout the nineteenth century, women in mourning expressed their grief and respect to their deceased's loved ones through a set of rituals such as wearing black, covering their faces with black crepe veils, and wearing jewellery made of the deceased's hair.¹

However, this jewellery started to gain popularity even before this time, beginning in the 17th century when mourning rings, which included hair from the deceased, were worn. Throughout the 18th century, the mourning jewellery took different forms, such as brooches and rings that had hair designs embedded under glass. In the 19th century, hair jewellery reached the peak of its popularity. No longer mourning jewellery, it evolved into sentimental jewellery used to commemorate mourning, as well as engagements and weddings. From the mid-19th century forward, instead of being part of the jewellery, hair became the jewellery piece itself; *it was boiled, weighted, glued, and strengthened with horse hair; it was braided, spun, woven, plaited, knitted, and crocheted; it was tipped, dotted, tasselled, caged, and secured with gold findings.*² It was then formed into various shapes and types, such as bracelets, watch chains, and hair ornaments.³

Looking at Victorian hair jewellery, one sees beyond the ring, brooch, or bracelet. Stories and memories associated with the loved one are encrypted in the form of hair embedded in the piece.

¹ Sonia A. Bedikian. "The death of mourning: from Victorian crepe to the little black dress." *Omega* 57, no. 1 (2008): 35-52.

² Ginny Redington Dawes, and Corinne Davidov. *Victorian Jewelry: Unexplored Treasures*. New York: Abbeville, 1991.

³ Ibid.



Fine Arts

Mona Hatoum / 2006

Keffieh

This piece is important to this research because Hatoum also interrogates feminism and culture in relation to hair.

In her art piece, Palestinian-British artist Mona Hatoum weaves long female human hair into the traditional Arab headscarf *keffieh*. Several layers of meanings and implications are embedded in the art piece: the political statement indicated by the use of the Arabic symbol of the Palestinian struggle for freedom, the *keffieh*, and the female hair as a translation of Palestinian anger. According to the artist, she *pictured women tearing their hair out from sheer rage*.¹ Another layer is that of feminism. Not only is the *keffieh* a symbol for struggle, it also symbolizes Arabic machismo, and she embroidered it with female hair to give Arab women a voice and presence.

¹ Urs Steiner and Samuel Herzog. "Interview with Mona Hatoum: The Idea Is What Matters!" *Montreal Sarai*. Spring 2005. http://montrealserai.com/_archives/2005_Volume_18/18_1/Article_4.htm (accessed Jan 30, 2013).



Crafts

Sonia Clark / 2006

Hair

Chair of the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, artist Sonia Clark uses hair as a medium in her projects. According to the artist, hair is the first fiber art form. In her *Hair* collection, hair is formed into *markers of chronology, wisdom and adornment.*¹

Clark's crafts are a strong statement of cultural identity—a theme reflected in this thesis as well, where the Arab Islamic culture remains the center point of the designs.

¹"Hair." *Sonia Clark*. <http://sonyaclark.com/medium/hair/> (accessed Jan 30, 2013).



Industrial Design

Phil McCrory, Alabama / 1989

Hair Mat

Watching the Exxon Valdez oil spill clean up, Phil McCrory, a hairdresser from Alabama, noticed how animals suffered most from the spill due to their fur's absorption of it. He realized that human hair has the same oil-absorbing quality, and subsequently, he experimented on using it as a solution for clearing water from oil spills, with positive results. NASA tested McCrory's theory and confirmed its validity. The *Hair Mat*, helped contain an oil spill off the coast of San Francisco in 2007, and was used in the Gulf of Mexico clean-up.¹

The *Hair Mat* is a very practical, eco-beneficial solution to the problem of oil spills. This thesis similarly utilized the physical properties of hair as catalysts for the designs. The thread-like natural material was felted and braided because the material qualities called for such techniques. However, unlike the *Hair Mat*, the designed objects in this thesis have less pragmatic use and are more of a conceptual statement that what hair represents, and not the material itself, is what gives it great importance when on the body. Similarly, when off the body, what it represents, beyond its material, is what confers its worth, which is at times even more significant than when it is attached to its original setting.

¹ Marsha Walton. "A Hair Raising Solution to Oilspills." *CNN.com*. May 28,1998. http://edition.cnn.com/TECH/science/9805/28/t_nasa.hairball/ (Oct 4, 2011).



Material Design

Thomas Vailly / 2011

Contemporary Vanitas

Masters student at Design Academy of Eindhoven, Thomas Vailly, created a bio plastic using human hair mixed with glycerine and sodium sulphite.¹

What's interesting about *Contemporary Vanitas* is that the designer created a material that could be formed into endless designs, instead of designing one outcome.

When I first began my project, I wanted to create a material out of hair that then could be used in various designs. Several materials and mediums were mixed with hair, such as plaster, glue and paper; however, the result did not serve my vision. On the contrary, it reflected exactly what I was trying to contradict. The result enhanced the feelings of revulsion by viewers, so the idea was dismissed and my project took a different direction.

One of the main objectives of this thesis was to give discarded hair a new, more appreciated life, and this is what Vailly did in *Contemporary Vanitas*. His project inspired the use of hair in a way similar to another pre-existing material; in Vailly's case, it is leather that was formed into objects. In this thesis, hair was treated in the same manner as wool, and designed into jewellery pieces and accessories. Another interesting aspect of *Contemporary Vanitas* is the ability of hair to be transformed into objects that could be mass-produced, such as the cups in the photo. Likewise, in this thesis, headscarves with prints of hair, photos, and microscopic hair images were created. These *Printed Head Scarves* could be mass-produced as well.

Thomas Vailly gave discarded hair aesthetic and commercial value—one of the main objectives of this thesis.

¹ Thomas Vailly, "*Contemporary Vanitas*." (Master's graduation project, Design Academy of Eindhoven, 2011, <http://www.vailly.com/project/contemporary-vanitas/> (accessed Jan 30, 2013).



Design Inquiry





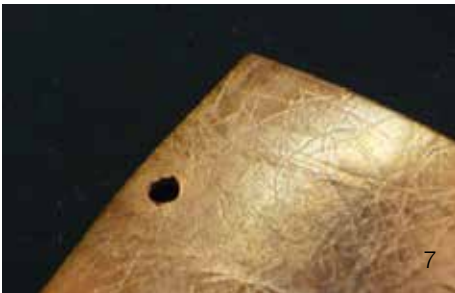
Initial Attempts

From left to right:

- 1- Hair mixed with gold nanoparticles.
- 2- Hair mixed with paper maché.
- 3- Hair glued on metal.
- 4- Bracelet made of laser-cut acrylic, bras wires and hair.
- 5- Hair dipped in plaster.
- 6- Hair mixed with glue.
- 7- Copper etched by a single hair.
- 8- Felted hair.

When I first started my project, and inspired by Thomas Vailly, I wanted to create a material out of hair that could then be used in various designs. Hair was mixed with different mediums such as glue, paper mache, and plaster, and even felted. However, viewers reacted more strongly to untreated hair, which led to the thesis taking a different direction and to the usage of hair as-is.

Before taking this decision, I tried etching copper using a single hair; I also glued hair to ready-designed jewellery pieces, and laser cut acrylic in attempts to design my version of sentimental jewellery. I also mixed hair with gold nanoparticles. This experiment was conducted with no expectations, and was driven out of curiosity to what might result from of mixing the scientific field with the design field. Unfortunately, such an attempt required more time and resources than were available. Hopefully, in the future, I might have a second take on the matter.





Sentimental Jewellery

Hairring

The 3D printed ring collection *Hairring* is a contemporary take on the Victorian Sentimental jewelry. Personal, present stories lived and experienced with loved ones, were celebrated in rings used to both collect and display a beloved one's hair.

This collection contains three types of rings, each of a different size and function: The *Head Hair Ring*, the *Eyebrow Ring*, and the *Beard Ring*.



*Hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our materials and survives us, like love. It is so light, so gentle, so escaping from the idea of death, that, with a lock of hair belonging to a child or friend, we may almost look up to heaven... and say 'I have a piece of thee here, not unworthy of thy being now.'*¹

¹ Ginny Redington Dawes, and Corinne Davidov. *Victorian Jewelry: Unexplored Treasures*. New York: Abbeville, 1991.



Head Hair Ring

Hair located on the head is given the most importance, and the act of brushing hair itself symbolizes the beautifying of oneself, the maternal love of a mom brushing her daughter's hair, or love expressed by stroking a lover's hair. These meanings led to the creation of the *Head Hair* ring, the biggest in the collection, which is used to comb one's hair in an attempt to both caress and collect it. Formed by three rings joined together by a hairbrush top, this ring is worn on the three middle fingers of the hand.

Beard Ring

The Beard Ring could be worn on one finger to brush the beard and collect the fallen hairs. As previously mentioned, beards signify wisdom, masculinity, and religiosity. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious figures grow their beards. The Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W) said: I have no connection with one who shaves, shouts and tears his clothing e.g. in grief or affrication.¹ Beards are “sociological signifiers;” in the BBC article *Decoding Facial Hair in the Arab World*, journalist Ashraf Khalil describes how different Islamic parties groom their beards in distinct ways: the Brotherhood members keep a full and well groomed beard, whereas the Salafists grow their beards long and ungroomed.² By studying his beard, an idea of a person’s background can be painted.

¹ Reported by Abu Darda (R.A.) in Muslim, Hadith no. 501.

² Ashraf Khalil. “Decoding facial hair in the Arab world.” *BBC News Magazine*, Feb 2, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20877090> (Feb 20, 2013).



Eyebrow Ring

The Eyebrow Ring was designed because of the importance of eyebrows in self-expression, especially in the Gulf. In a culture where, due to the history of wearing a *borgo* and *hijab*, the main focus is the eyes, much attention is paid to eyebrows. Religious women keep their eyebrows in their natural form, whereas more open women form their eyebrows into various shapes, sometimes natural looking, at other times in very sharp designs which attempt to make a statement and to draw more attention to the eyes.



Feminine Masculinity

Beards have always been reflective of wisdom, religion, and power. During ancient Egyptian times, both men and women wore false beards as a sign of high rank. Royalty's false beards were made of either bronze or gold; Hatshepsut, the Pharaoh ruler of Egypt, was always illustrated with her long, false, gold beard.¹ Consequently, even the most powerful female rulers of old times had to resemble men in some way, in order to prove their authority.

The *Beard-Chest Necklace* questions the established gender roles and blurs the customary divisions separating masculinity and femininity.

¹ Victoria Sherrow. *Encyclopedia of Hair: A cultural History*. Westport: Greenwood, 2006.



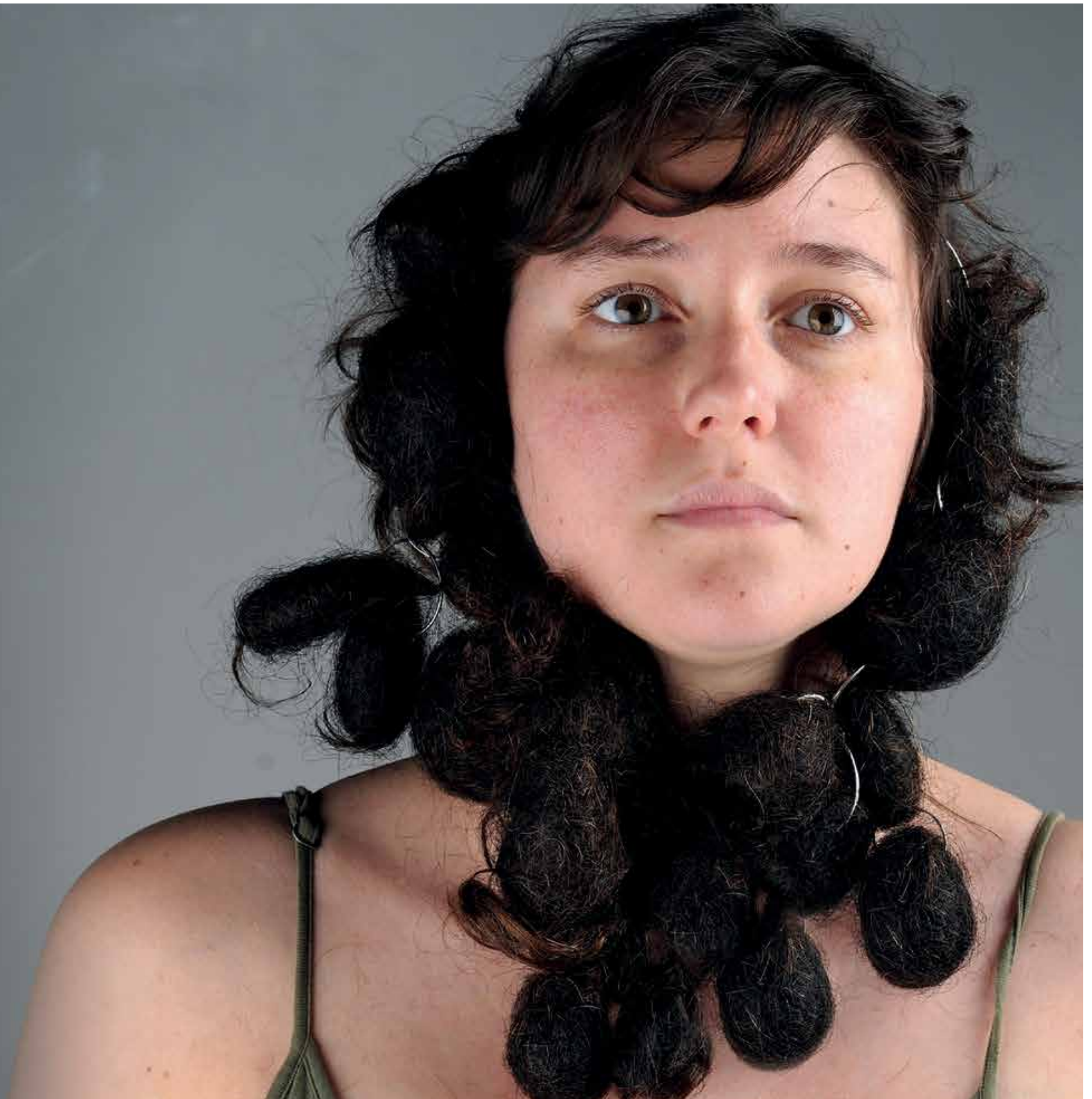
Fortunate Misfortune

A failed attempt to felt human hair resulted in the creation of hairballs. This second form of life the hair took was even more interesting and engaging than the first. Viewers who saw the hairballs were interested in their almost perfect spherical shape, and wanted to carefully hold and feel them. At that point, creating something out of these hairballs became my new mission.



Beard-Chest Necklace

Worn as a beard



Beard-Chest Necklace

Worn on chest



Crown-Beard-Chest Necklace

Worn as a crown

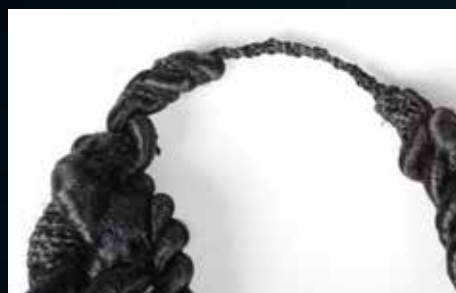
As much as I love my very rough, raw, coarse hair blobs in *Chest Beard Necklace*, I wanted to create another version of it, only more refined, polished, and prettified. The result was a rope-braided necklace.

There's an Arabic saying:

تاج المرأة شعرها

A woman's hair is her crown. This design reflects the idea of associating hair with women's beauty in addition to questioning its gender related values. This necklace can be worn on the face as a beard, on the chest, and as a crown on the head.

Three rope braids of different sizes were stitched together by hair, and the ends were joined together by very small braids that gave the design a more refined look.



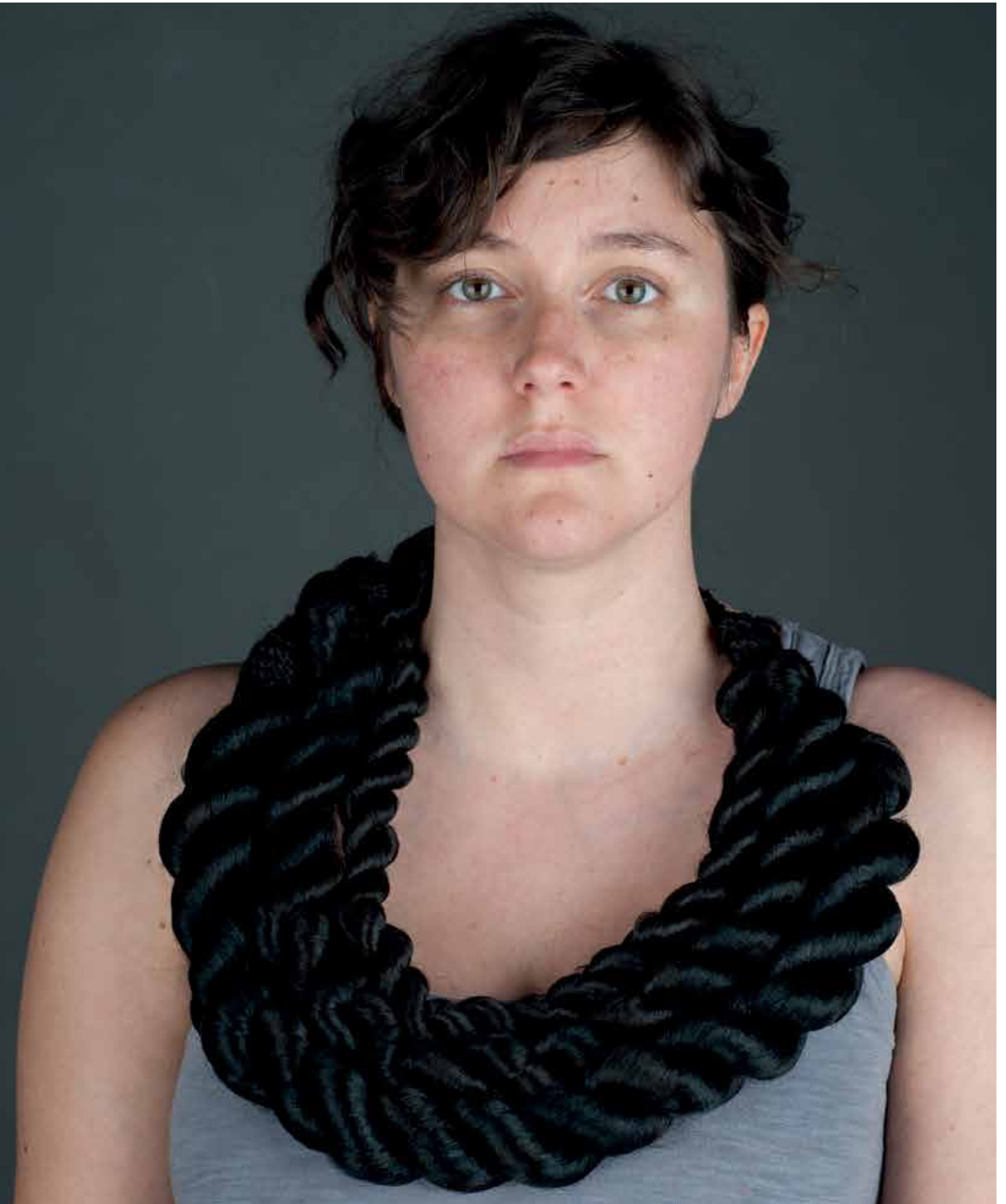
Crown-Beard-Chest Necklace

Worn as a beard



Crown-Beard-Chest Necklace

Worn on Chest





Religious

Covering Using the Covered

But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered (Corinthians 11:5-6).

The Cohen shall uncover the woman's hair (Bamidbar 5: 18).

O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the faithful to draw their outergarments (jilbabs) close around themselves; that is better that they will be recognized and not annoyed. And God is ever Forgiving, Gentle (Quran, Alahzab 59).

Hair has an inherent link to cultural symbolism. A woman's hair signifies beauty, fertility, seduction, creativity, spiritedness, and grace¹; this is why in many religions women are supposed to cover their hair as a sign of modesty. But if the hair is covered with hair, is it still considered covering? And does it still comply with the religious and social norms imposed on women?

¹ Donald Kalsched. *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit*. London and NY, 1996.

*Pretty lady don't forget to hide your hair, for I'm jealous of the
breeze that goes through its strands —Arabic Song*

Braided Hair Scarf

During my experimentation with hair I came across two very creative African hairdressers who work in an African hair salon in Qatar. After having a look at my braided hair extensions, Aileen and Lina suggested the use of African-textured hair extensions, which holds more firmly when braided. Since they are the experts at the field, I handed them my sketch, chose the colours, asked for the basic braid as the one I was using, and the ladies took it from there. The extensions were braided and then the braids stitched together by hair. I was so happy with the result that I gave them another design to execute, the *Beard-Hair-Crown* necklace.



Sensing the Scarf

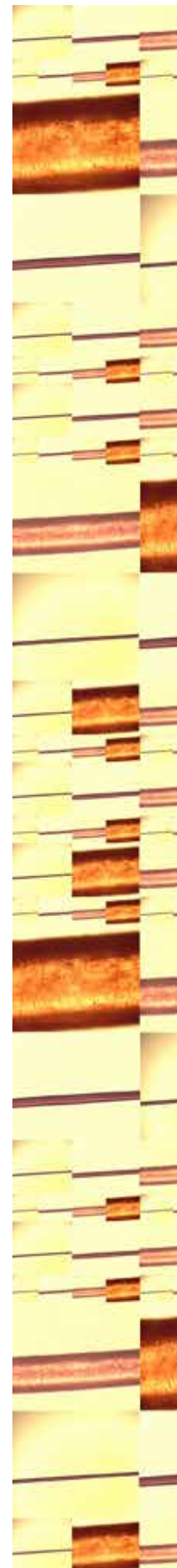
The *Hair Scarf* could be the *khaliji*-female version of the Palestinian *keffiyeh* created by artist Mona Hatoum. Inspired by the *sheila* worn by women in the Gulf to cover their hair, the “Hair Scarf” was designed using braided hair extensions. Measuring 200cm*30cm and weighing a little over 2kg, this scarf is the main design of the thesis. It questions the custom of covering hair by flirting with the idea of revealing and hiding, covering with the covered.

There’s an affiliation between hair and the senses. Hair is linked to the sense of touch; hair can sense movements of air as well as touch by physical objects¹. While mapping all links of hair to the five senses of the human body—sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste—I noticed that hair is deeply saturated with references, symbols, and links that contain embedded cultural and material indications. I therefore wanted my design to not only surprise but to also trigger the viewers’ senses. And it did. As much as viewers were repulsed by the idea working with human hair, and wanted to have nothing to do with either my collected human hair or the artificial hair extensions, almost everyone who saw the scarf wanted to touch it—despite knowing that it was made of hair. One even smelled it! When it was perceived as merely a scarf, no one was interested in more than looking; however, when they learned it was made out of hair, more senses were involved and thus more interaction with the design. It became more than just a scarf. However, when they found out it was synthetic hair, their wow declined. It is real, off-the-body human hair, given a form through design, that garners more value.

¹ N.H. Sabah. “Controlled Stimulation of Hair Follicle Receptors.” *Journal of Applied Physiology* 36, No. 02 (1974): 256-257.







Printed Scarves

One concept studied in the thesis explored the notion of covering hair with hair. A literal take on the subject was the *Braided Hair scarf*, designed using braided hair extensions. When exhibited, and when viewers knew the material it was made of, it produced reactions ranging from surprise and admiration to curiosity and interest, or cautiously touching the scarf and even smelling it.

Another interpretation of the concept was using hair in the form of print. Three headscarves were created, two with real hair photos, and one with microscopic images of my own hair, all printed onto fabric and sewn into scarves. Unlike the *Braided Hair scarf*, these scarves didn't get the same reaction from the spectators. When printed, hair lost its grandeur and became no more than a pattern. The magnified images of real hair took the form of an even more abstracted graphical element. Apparently, covering hair with a photo of it allows more acceptance to the point that it is no longer seen as hair, and all connotations, either positive or negative, are lost.

Conclusion

Findings

My aim in this thesis was to reflect on and question the prominence given by society, culture, and religion to human hair that remains on the body, and to transform some of this glory to hair that is discarded, and off the body. This was accomplished by designing pieces made of real human hair, synthetic human hair, and printed images of real hair; thus studying all representations of hair and how each was perceived by the viewer-user.

The first part of my thesis goal—*questioning social, cultural and religious values linked to hair*—was achieved by designing jewellery pieces and headscarves made and used in unconventional ways. A necklace designed to be worn as a beard highlighted the social gender discrimination and traditionally approved gender roles separating masculinity and femininity. A headscarf created from hair invited contemplation on the practice of covering hair in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf. As critical designs, the intention of the objects was not to discover any answers, but to inspire reflection by the viewer—and they did. The jewellery pieces and headscarf prompted examination upon those gender and cultural-religious values attached to hair in its original setting, and initiated discussion among the spectators. What differentiated these pieces from other human derived designed objects, was that they engaged directly with the user. Bringing hair back to the body to wrap the face and the head in new forms, made it more intimate. It was not just the idea, but also the usage of the objects that gave them originality.

The second intent of this thesis was *to transform some of this glory to hair that is discarded*. Accomplishing this goal was not simple. How the hair was presented, and its artificiality or naturalness, played a vital role in achieving the desired glorification, admiration and valuation of hair off the body.

The *Hair Rings* presented coarse, messy tufts of real human hair. The sentimental, 3D printed rings themselves didn't garner as much attention and intrigue as the hair they collected. When I wore them alone without hair, the rings were considered *pretty*, but when natural human hair was added to the formula, the *pretty* response was replaced by repulsion. A viewer commented that she wouldn't mind wearing a hair ring as long as she used it to collect her own hair and no one else's. Apparently, it is the material human waste of the other that elicits negative feelings, and not the material itself.

In addition to rings, two necklaces were designed: the *Beard-Chest Necklace*, made from felted real human hair, and the *Crown-Beard-Chest Necklace*, created from synthetic African textured hair. (For easier reading, I will refer to them as Beard necklace and Crown necklace.) The Crown necklace, when presented as natural hair, earned admiration from viewers, but this admiration waned when they realized the hair was actually artificial. They favored instead the Beard necklace—previously considered less aesthetic. However, the less refined Beard necklace made of unpolished raw hair blobs proved more intriguing, provoking feelings of cautious admiration as well as a curiosity to feel and touch the spherical hairballs.

Finally, my thesis explored another dimension of hair. Printed images of human hair, in addition to magnified images of my own, were applied to three scarves. I had expected the magnified prints to be the most applauded by spectators, but to my surprise, none of the printed scarves remotely evoked the emotions that the braided hair scarf did.

In this exploration, I learned that, when treated as a simulacra, hair became less interesting. None of the feelings induced by real hair—glorification or revulsion—were experienced by viewers when encountering representations of hair, such as printed images or synthetics. Hair was only important when it came from human beings; there is something about its connection to the body that gives it its halo.

Another thing I realized is that the feelings of admiration, intrigue or aversion depended on the way the hair was presented. Although both the hair blobs and the tuft of hair used on the rings were both genuine human hair, the latter was perceived as disgusting, while the former intrigued the viewer. Seemingly, the neater the hair was, and the more it resembled something else, the more it was accepted. The hair scarf and crown necklace attracted viewers; the beard hair blob necklace intrigued them; but the hair on the sentimental 3D printed rings repelled viewers. Even a wig used for presentation purposes aroused disgust. But isn't this also the case when hair still remains on the body? Only well-kept hair is admired as a symbol of beauty and seduction; few are seduced by a beggar's dirty, shaggy hair. Although the meanings linked to hair were represented by these objects, the feelings linked to hair were transferred to them—not because of the objects themselves, but by the way the hair was presented.

Future Direction

In this thesis, hair as a material was used to raise cultural, social and religious perspectives mostly in the Arab-Islamic region, where those views and beliefs are given great value and importance.

In the future, I would like to further study and reflect upon my culture and that of the Arab world. Hopefully, I would pursue this by combining my design skills with different fields, teaming up with scientists, doctors, and perhaps engineers. My brief experiment with nano-particles, with the help of VCU Professor Dr Khalid Saoud, made me realize the great possibilities and outcomes one could achieve with science.

Hair may or may not be the medium, but designing something from the human to the human remains an interesting approach.

Credits

- A.N.D TRADING CO.
- Nails
- Franck Provost Paris
- Jean Louis David

Images

Unless listed below, all photos and illustrations are courtesy of the author.

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- Thesis exhibition, images courtesy of Dr. Thomas Modeen.

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Appendix

VCU Qatar
Thesis Exhibition



Studio Droog, Amsterdam

Seven Little Wonders

The Braided Hair Scarf was chosen by curator Renney Remakers, co-founder and director of design company Droog, to be exhibited at Hotel Droog, Amsterdam. Below is the press release.

Seven little wonders

date: Dec 11 - Jan 13, 2013
location: Hotel Droog

Seven apple trees stood in the Droog Gallery. With this exhibition they were joined by seven topical projects from the world of art and design. Each project touched—in a modest and often poetic way—something in the news, such as increasing violence in schools, the much-discussed headscarf for Islamic culture and the issue of national identity. Some of the works on display include the animation One Past Two by Aimée de Jongh, a selection of works from Identity Land by Droog Lab with Erik Kessels, Wild Bone China by Christien Meindertsma for Droog Lab, a headscarf of braided hair by Rania Chamsine and a humidifier that doesn't require electricity by Minghshuo Zhang.

